PROSTITUTES AND COURTESANS IN ANCIENT GREECE

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hetaerea playing the drinking game kottabos at a symposia

- Greek aristocrats had courtesans and all-make drinking parties often featured naked prostitutes. Marriages who often arranged and men sought satisfaction with courtesans or male lovers. Prostitutes at Ephesus advertised their services outside the doorway of the brothel with an inscription of a foot and a woman with a mohawk haircut. ◂

- The Greek women with the most power and freedom, surprisingly, were courtesans, known as " hetaeras" . When they weren't working Grecian courtesans didn't have to maintain an image of virtue so they could do what they wanted, and they had money to do it with. [Source: "Greek and Roman Life" by Ian Jenkins from the British Museum,||]

- "On Wives and Hetairai (Prostitutes)," "Demosthenes wrote (c. 350 B.C.): "We take a hetaera for our pleasure, a concubine for daily attention to our physical wants, a wife to give us legitimate children and a respected house."

- Grecian consorts were sort of similar to geisha girls. They entertained their patrons with poems, dancing and singing at drinking parties (called "symposiums"). Sex was extra, in some cases a lot extra. Sometimes their prices were set according to how many sexual positions they had mastered. One courtesan who had mastered 12 positions charged the most for one called " keles" (meaning "racehorse" in which the woman mounted the man from the top).

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"Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World" by Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. McClure (2006) Amazon.com;
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"Intimate Lives of the Ancient Greeks" by Stephanie L. Budin (2013) Amazon.com;
"Women in Ancient Greece" by Susan Blundell (1995) Amazon.com;
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Hetaerae

- Hetaerae translates to female companions. They seem to have been unknown in the heroic age, but in historic times they were found almost everywhere, and association with them was so common that it was hardly a cause of reproach even to married men. Some of them were rich women, owning large numbers of slaves; their fame spread through the whole of Greece, and their rooms were crowded by men of the first rank in politics, literature, and art; great artists vied in representing them in bronze and marble, and their fame has descended even to our own times.

- In order to understand the possibility of their social intercourse with men of unblemished reputation, and the fact that these girls played a part in Greek literature almost more important than that of honest women, we must bear in mind the slight education and retired life of the Greek women. Even this can hardly account for the permission granted to a hetaera like Phryne to dedicate her statue by Praxiteles at Delphi, or her venturing to bathe in the sea, completely naked, like an Aphrodite Anadyomene, in the presence of numerous admiring spectators. We can only explain this by remembering the intense Hellenic love of beauty, apart from the considerations of morality, which looked on a beautiful human body as a divine work demanding adoration, which made it possible to forget the moral weaknesses inherent in it.

- Greek art is very rich in scenes from the life of hetaerae; many have been already represented here, and others will follow. We must face the fact that the very period which is renowned in Greek literature and art as that of the greatest splendour, was a time, also, of moral rottenness. Where there is much light we must expect much shade; and in modern art, too, the highest development of painting and sculpture was contemporaneous with the religious and moral degeneracy of the Middle ages; indeed, the Rome of Alexander VI. and Leo X. was probably far more immoral than the Athens of Pericles.

Hetaerae Houses

- The law regarded the existence of hetaerae not only a matter of course, but even as necessary, and the State promoted the establishment of houses for them. There were many such at all the ports, and many large manufacturing or trading cities, such as Corinth, obtained a distinct reputation on this account; though at the same time it was often said that a stay there was both dangerous and expensive. [Source "The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks" by Hugo Blümner, translated by Alice Zimmern, 1895]

- Besides these public establishments, the visitors to which paid a fixed entrance fee, the amount of which varied according to the elegance of the house, there were also private establishments of a somewhat different character. These were kept by a man or woman, sometimes an old hetaera, whose property the girls in the house became, by being bought direct as slaves or obtained in some other way. Many of these poor girls had been exposed in their infancy, and brought up by the owners of these houses, who repaid themselves for the cost of nurture by the income thus brought in. Such girls were often the heroines of comedies, and in the end were happily united to their lovers. The flute-girls, who played at the symposia, were also often kept in such houses, and their owners not only provided rich and elegant clothing, but also spent much money on their education, and especially on the training of their musical talents, which enabled them to earn higher pay.

- But far the greater part of the hetaerae lived alone, and every large town possessed a number of these women, who were classed in different grades according to their education. Although there was no official control kept over them, yet they were not left absolutely free; in most towns they had to pay a tax to the State. Later writers have maintained, but with what accuracy is uncertain, that a special dress was prescribed for them; probably they were only distinguished from other women by conspicuous bright clothing and more elaborate dress. The legal protection generally accorded to women in case of wrongful treatment, could naturally not be claimed by them, and a hetaera who had a child could not claim from its father money for its support. In fact, the lot of the majority was at best but gilded misery, and many ended their days in extreme poverty.

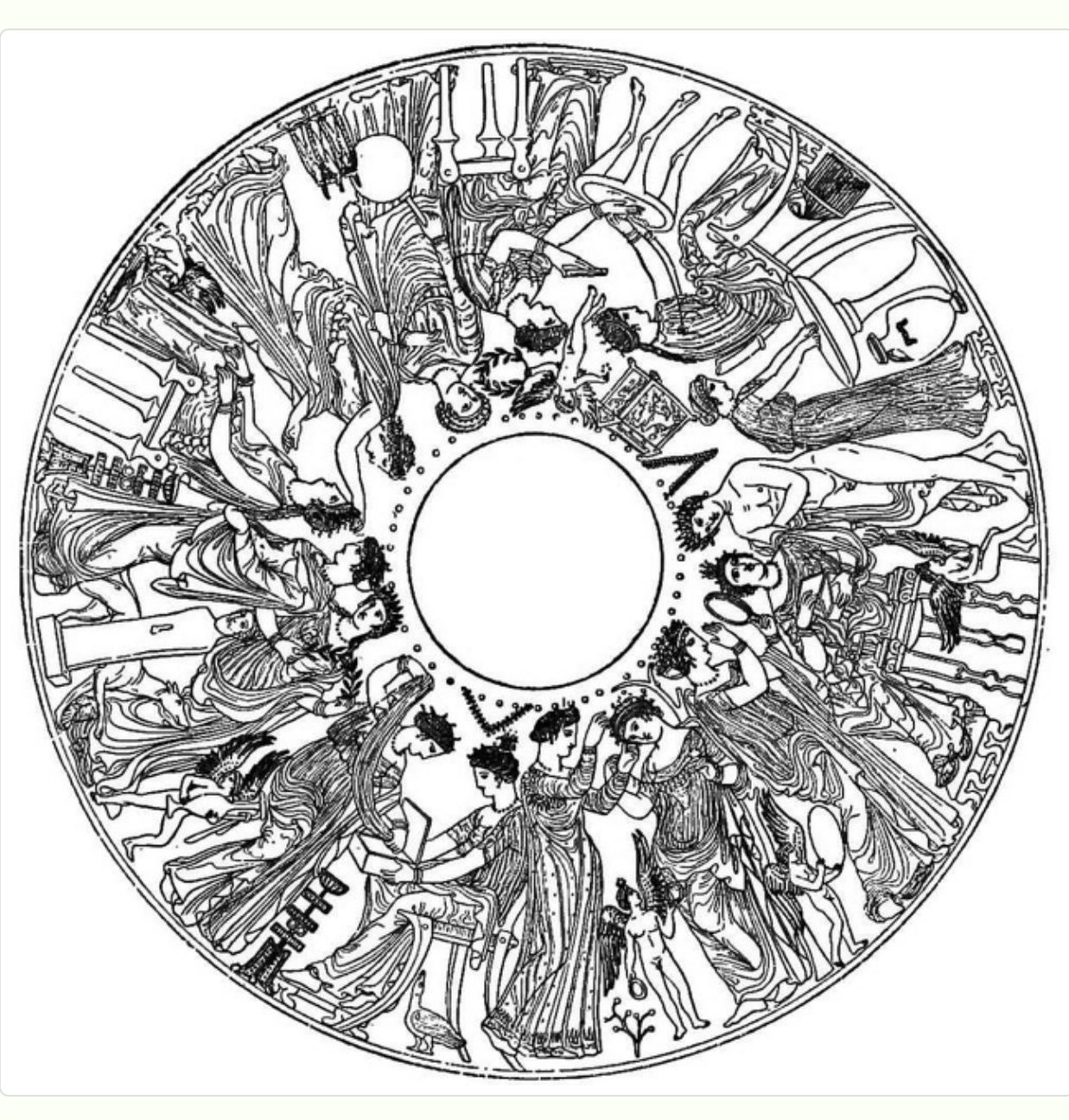
Young Hetaerae?

- There is variety of scenes of hetaerae on vase made with remarkable fineness. On the lid of a terra-cotta jar or box, probably used for cosmetic purposes, we see a large number of girls, most of whom are occupied with washing or freshening up. In spite of the modesty of their dress and behaviour, it does not seem probable that we are here obtaining an insight into a family dwelling; the numerous little Cupids represented, and also the presence of a young man, lead us to suppose that we see hetaerae before us. [Source "The Home Life of the Ancient Greeks" by Hugo Blümner, translated by Alice Zimmern, 1895]

- The young man is leaning against the seat of a richly-clad lady, who appears somewhat more matronly than the others; she holds an open jewel casket in her hand, from which she is about to take some object. The young man is leaning on a stick, at the end of which a Cupid is climbing up in play. If we follow the view of L. Stephani, in regarding this woman as the superintendent of the girls, he is probably right in his further interpretation, that the youth has given the casket to this lady in order to win her favor and access to the girls.

- To the left of this group we find a girl holding a hand mirror before her, apparently about to arrange her hair, as she is holding one hand up, but this might also be interpreted as a gesture of pleased surprise at her appearance. Next to her is an attendant helping a girl arrange her head-dress; both her hands are occupied with it, while the girl bends her head a little forward, and in her hands already holds the necklace which she is going to put on. Two Cupids stand beside her, one carrying some indistinct object, perhaps a tympanum, the other apparently holding two bracelets.

- On an easy-chair, under which appears a bird, perhaps a duck, a girl is sitting holding an open casket, out of which a woman, standing in front of her, has taken some fine material, or a veil, which she is now unfolding. Between the two, on the ground stands an incense-burner , next a Cupid holding an oil-flask in his hands. A richly-dressed woman leans against a terminal figure of the bearded Dionysus, bending a branch into a wreath with both hands; in front stands a dog, looking up at her. Further to the left a girl is sitting on a stool, while an attendant is arranging her hair; she has placed both hands on her knees, and is sitting quite quietly while the other, to judge from the posture of her left hand, appears to be saying something to her; the Cupid, kneeling on the ground, is fastening the sandals of the seated girl; an incense-burner stands beside them.



Young hetaerae described above

- Next them stands a woman with richly-dressed hair; her right hand hangs down and holds a mirror; at her feet is some object whose meaning is not clear. Still further we see a little table on three goat-shaped feet, at which two girls are sitting opposite one another, one on an easy-chair, the other on a simpler seat; under the easy-chair is a cage with a little bird. We cannot determine the occupation of the girls who have placed their hands on the table, while one of them holds some indistinct object in her left hand — probably they are playing some game; above them hovers a Cupid with a wreath of leaves; near him we observe a beautifully ornamented little chest. The last of these female figures stands in front of a washing basin, in which she has placed both hands, probably to wash them, rather than, as Stephani supposes, in order to wash some object in the basin; for a domestic occupation such as the washing of any garment would not be appropriate to the rest of the scenes. On the ground stands a beautifully-shaped water-jar.

Temple Prostitutes in Ancient Greece

- Two categories of prostitutes in ancient Greek were specifically related to sacred or temple prostitution are: 1) hetaires, also known as courtesans, typically more educated women that served within temples; and 2) as hierodoules, slave women or female priests who worked within temples and served the sexual requests of visitors to the temple. While there may not be a direct connection between temples and prostitution, many prostitutes and courtesans worshipped Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and would use their earnings to pay for dedications and ritualistic celebrations in honour of the goddess. Some prostitutes also viewed the action of sexual service and sexual pleasure as an act of devotion to the goddess of love, worshipping Aphrodite through an act rather than a physical dedication. [Source Wikipedia]

- Sacred prostitution within the Temples of Aphrodite in the city of Corinth was well-known. Strabo wrote in "Geographia," (c. 20 A.D.) about Greece around 550 B.C: "The temple of Aphrodite in Corinth was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple slaves — prostitutes — whom both free men and women had dedicated to the goddess. And therefore it was also on account of these temple-prostitutes that the city was crowded with people and grew rich; for instance, the ship captains freely squandered their money, and hence the proverb, "Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth."" In the same work, Strabo compares Corinth to the city of Comana, confirming the belief that temple prostitution was a notable characteristic of Corinth.

- Prostitutes performed sacred functions within the temple of Aphrodite. They would often burn incense in honor of Aphrodite. Chameleon of Heracleia recorded in his book, On Pindar, that whenever the city of Corinth prayed to Aphrodite in manners of great importance, many prostitutes were invited to participate in the prayers and petitions.

- The girls involved in temple prostitution were typically slaves owned by the temple. In the temple of Apollo at Bulla Regia, a woman was found buried with an inscription reading: "Adulteress. Prostitute. Seize [me], because I fled from Bulla Regia." It has been speculated she might have been a woman forced into sacred prostitution as a punishment for adultery.

- However, some of the girls were gifted to the temple from other members of society in return for success in particular endeavors. One example that shows the gifting of girls to the temple is the poem of Athenaeus, which explores an athlete Xenophon's actions of gifting a group of courtesans to Aphrodite as a thanks-offering for his victory in a competition.

Aphrodite Temples and the Sexual Activity There

- In January 2021, archaeologists in Western Turkey announced they had discovered a sixth century B.C. temple dedicated to Aphrodite perhaps with evidence of activity by temple prostitutes. Candida Moss wrote in the Daily Beast: "The temple was discovered when a team of archaeologists, led by Elif Koparal of Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, unearthed remnants of a statue of a woman and an inscription that reads "this is the sacred area." Koparal and her team found the items in the ancient city of Aphrodisias in the southeast of Urla-Çeşme peninsula in Turkey. The ancient city was named after the famous goddess of love and beauty and so the team expected that there would be a cultic center somewhere in the area.[Source: Candida Moss, Daily Beast, January 31, 2021]

imagining the Temple of Aphrodite at Kythera

- "While all gods of Mount Olympus had temples and shrines dedicated to them throughout the ancient Mediterranean, and all of these sites attracted tourists and pilgrims, there is something about the cult of Aphrodite that sets it apart. If ancient people visited the religious centers dedicated to Asclepius looking for health care and healing, they visited Aphrodite's temples in search of a good time.

- "The ancient geographer and historian Strabo wrote that the Temple of Aphrodite in Corinth "was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple courtesans" and noted that many of the sailors who passed through the coastal city squandered their wages at the temple. According to the ancient writer Pindar, a wealthy athlete, Xenophon of Corinth, had dedicated a throng of courtesans to the temple in 464 B.C. after he won at the Olympic Games. Strabo adds that similar activities involving enslaved sex workers took place at the Temple of Aphrodite in Eryx. We are told that women who were looking to raise money for their dowries would prostitute themselves at temples dedicated to Venus (Aphrodite's equivalent). The temples of Aphrodite, our sources lead us to believe, were a religious kind of brothel where women worked as sacred prostitutes and religious ecstasy looked a lot like, well, other forms of ecstasy.

- "The historian Herodotus claims that in Babylon there was a temple devoted to "Aphrodite" where every woman in the country — both rich and poor alike — had to serve as a prostitute at least once in her lifetime. Herodotus recounts how women sat in the temple precinct waiting to be chosen by male patrons and were unable to reject any suitor or amount of money. Having discharged her duties she could then return home. Herodotus writes that attractive women were quickly selected but that the less good looking sometimes had to wait up to four years to go home.

- "Herodotus's tale, however, isn't actually about Aphrodite but, more likely Mullissu, a Babylonian goddess that he equated with Aphrodite. He's describing Babylonians, or outsiders, and often describes the strange and "barbaric" practices of uncivilized peoples to his Greek audience. Elsewhere in his work he refers to cannibalism, incest, and a tribe of one-eyed people — so it's worth taking his observations with a hefty pinch of salt.

- "Even when it comes to Greece and Rome some have questioned just how widespread sacred prostitution actually was. Most of our ancient references are dependent on two sources: Herodotus and Pindar. In her book The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity, Stephanie Budin argues that "Sacred prostitution never existed in the ancient Near East or Mediterranean." Part of the problem, Budin shows, is that sacred sex is regularly confused with sacred prostitution but there are also language problems. Sometimes enslaved women who were sold to the temple (a common form of ancient manumission) and became "sacred slaves" are confused with prostitutes. Translational issues with Akkadian and ancient Greek often lead people to conclude that someone was a prostitute when in fact they were a priestess or an enslaved worker. Both Herodotus and the later Christian writers who used him used these stories of sensual prostitutes to discredit and barbarize the cultures of which they were a part.

- "If temple prostitution sounds sexy, exotic, and, heck, a whole lot more fun than regular church that was probably the point. Stories about the taboo-breaking sexual behavior of foreign women have always been a source of intrigue. There probably were some instances of ritualized sacred sex and prostitution, but it wasn't as common as readers of Herodotus, Pindar, and Strabo thought. None of this means that you shouldn't visit the temples of Aphrodite, but if it's ancient brothels you're looking for you should try Pompeii.

Famous Ancient Greek Courtesans

Aspasia

- During the Golden Age of Greece perhaps the most powerful person after the Athenian leader Pericles was his consort . Some historians claim Aspasia wrote many of his speeches and pulled strings behind the scene. She was a woman of the highest intellectual endowments and most cultivated taste, who it is said attracted men as much by the power of her intellect as her female charms. She drew admiration from many people both in her time and afterwards. Some say that the important character of Diotima in Plato's Symposia was based on Aspasia.

- Other celebrated hetaerae, such as Laïs and Phryne, owe their renown chiefly to their extraordinary beauty and the numerous anecdotes about their lives, greed for money, and shameless character. These hetaerae, who are assumed to have lived by themselves, were either freed women or foreigners, whose wit and grace may easily have attracted even men of note, while others were mere courtesans, covetous, superficial, and dress-loving.

- Lamia, a Greek courtesan, charged king Demetetrius of Macedonia 250 talents ($300,000) for her services. To pay off the expense the king instituted a tax on soap. The famous Athenian orator and statesman Demosthenes wanted the Sicilian-born Greek courtesan so bad he offered "1,000 drachmas for a single night." She took one look at him and upped the figure to 10,000 drachmas ($20,000), a figure he was still happy to pay. ◂

- Mnesarte was said to be the most beautiful prostitute in Greece during the 4th century B.C. Once when it looked as if she was going to be found guilty in a court of law for the crime of profanity, she ripped open her robe in front of the judge and was acquitted. ◂

- According to Hermippus of Smyrna the glamorous courtesan Phyrne was never seen naked but "at the great festival of the Eleuina and that of the Posidonoa." There he wrote "in full sight of a crowd that had gathered from all over Greece, she removed her cloak and let loose her hair before stepping into the seas; and it was from her that Apelles painted his likeness of Aphrodite coming out of the sea." Other famous courtesans included Lais, Gnathaena and Naera.

Poems on Ancient Greek Prostitutes

- Philemon wrote in "Hetaerae" [Prostitutes] (c. 350 B.C.):
"But you did well for every man, O Solon:
For they do say you were the first to see
The justice of a public-spirited measure,
The savior of the State (and it is fit
For me to utter this avowal, Solon);
You, seeing that the State was full of men,
Young, and possessed of all the natural appetites,
And wandering in their lusts where they'd no business,
Bought women and in certain spots did place them,
Common to be and ready for all comers.
They naked stood: look well at them, my youth —
Do not deceive yourself; aren't you well off ?
You're ready, so are they: the door is open —
The price an obol: enter straight — there's
No nonsense here, no cheat or trickery;
But do just what you like, how you like.
You're off: wish her good-bye;
She's no more claim on you."
[Source: Mitchell Carroll, Greek Women, (Philadelphia: Rittenhouse Press, 1908), pp. 96-103, 166-175, 210-212, 224, 250, 256-260]

- Anaxilas wrote in Hetairai (c. 525 B.C.):
"The man whoe'er has loved a hetaira,
Will say that no more lawless, worthless race
Can anywhere be found: for what ferocious
Unsociable she-dragon, what Chimaira
Though it breathe fire from its mouth, what Charybdis,
What three-headed Skylla, dog o' the sea,
Or hydra, sphynx, or raging lioness,
Or viper, or winged harpy (greedy race),
Could go beyond those most accursed harlots?
There is no monster greater. They alone
Surpass all other evils put together."

- Eubulus wrote in "The Reproach of the Hetairai (c. 350 B.C.):
"By Zeus, we are not painted with vermilion,
Nor with dark mulberry juice, as you are often:
And then, if in the summer you go out,
Two rivulets of dark, discolored hue
Flow from your eyes, and sweat drops from your jaws
And makes a scarlet furrow down your neck,
And the light hair which wantons o'er your face
Seems gray, so thickly is it plastered o'er."

Dancing Girls in Ancient Greece

- Leonard C. Smithers and Sir Richard Burton wrote in the notes of "Sportive Epigrams on Priapus": "Lipsius discourses on public prostitutes in the theatre. Telethusa and Quinctia were probably Gaditanian damsels who combined the professions of dancer and harlot. These dancing girls were called saltatrices. Ovid in his Amores, speaks of dancing women: 'One pleases by her gestures, and moves her arms to time, and moves her graceful sides with languishing art in the dance; to say nothing about myself, who am excited on every occasion, put Hippolytus there — he would become a Priapus.' Dancing was in general discouraged amongst the Romans. During the Republic and the earlier periods of the Empire women never appeared on the stage, but they frequently acted in the parties of the great. These dancing girls accompanied themselves with music (the chief instrument being the castanet) and sometimes with song. [Source: "Sportive Epigrams on Priapus" translation by Leonard C. Smithers and Sir Richard Burton, 1890, sacred-texts.com]

- " In the Banquet of Xenophon reference is made to their agility and intelligence: "Immediately Ariadne entered the room, richly dressed in the habit of a bride, and placed herself in the elbow-chair ... Then a hoop being brought in with swords fixed all around it, their points upwards, and placed in the middle of the hall, the dancing-girl immediately leaped head foremost into it through the midst of the points, and then out again with a wonderful agility ... I see the dancing-girl entering at the other end of the hall, and she has brought her cymbals along with her ... At the same time the other girl took her flute; the one played and the other danced to admiration; the dancing-girl throwing up and catching again her cymbals, so as to answer exactly the cadency of the music, and that with a surprising dexterity.

- "The costume of female acrobats was of the scantiest. In some designs the lower limbs of the figures are shown enveloped in thin drawers. From vase paintings we see that female acrobatic costume sometimes consisted solely of a decorated band swathed round the abdomen and upper part of the thighs, thus resembling in appearance the middle band adopted by modern acrobats. Juvenal speaks of the 'barbarian harlots with embroidered turbans', and the girls standing for hire at the Circus; and in Satire XI he says, 'You may perhaps expect that a Gaditanian singer will begin to tickle you with her musical choir, and the girls encouraged by applause sink to the ground with tremulous buttocks.' This amatory dancing with undulations of the loins and buttocks was called cordax; Plautus and Horace term a similar dance Iconici motus. Forberg, commenting on Juvenal, says, 'Do not miss, reader, the motive of this dance; with their buttocks wriggling the girls finally sank to the ground, reclining on their backs, ready for the amorous contest. Different from this was the Lacedaemonian dance bíbasis, when the girls in their leaps touched their buttocks with their heels. Aristophanes in Lysistrata writes — 'Naked I dance, and beat with my heels the buttocks.' And Pollux, 'As to the bíbasis, that was a Laconian dance. There were prizes competed for, not only amongst the young men, but also amongst the young girls; the essence of these dances was to jump and touch the buttocks with the heels. The jumps were counted and credited to the dancers. They rose to a thousand in the bíbasis.' Still worse was the kind of dance which was called eklaktisma, in which the feet had to touch the shoulders."

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